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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an alternative instructional concept--a distance learning/cohort teaching/cohort student grouping--that used the Internet to deliver instruction. Twenty graduate students at two universities, Southern Illinois University and the University of Southern Mississippi, subscribed to a listserv and worked cooperatively on a case study problem in which an experienced teacher applying for a position as a high school principal in an expanding school district is asked to develop a first-year plan to demonstrate his or her qualifications for the new job. Outcomes expected from this learning experience included: the opportunity to work collegially even though separated by a significant distance; learning to function as a single entity and to identify the information necessary to address and reach a solution; awareness of the commonality of administrative problems and issues; choosing to form a cohort network for professional career support; and evolving into a community of life-long learners. It was concluded that for such a method of instruction to be effective, courses must have clearly stated outcome expectations, the case studies must be viable and relevant, and there must be reliable technological resources. (CH)

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Utilizing Distance learning and the Case Study Method to Enhance Instruction Between Two Universities

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Background

This paper was developed to present an alternative instructional concept, i.e., a distance learning, cohort teaching, and cohort student grouping facilitated via technology. The vehicle for delivery of this instructional strategy was a listserv that was established and maintained through The University of Southern Mississippi's Technology Services. The instructional strategy employed with the pilot study cohort student group to facilitate the learning experience was that of a case study model developed by the involved professors for this specific project.

The researchers have had an extensive personal association of over 38 years and of that period of time they have also had a professional association of over 30 years. Throughout this 30 plus years of professional association, the writers observed that their cohort of two was invaluable in various decision making processes. While in graduate school (one writer attended Missouri University, while the other attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison) the writers always seemed to be taking different courses. Yet, the authors found that they continued to engage in discussions of various issues from the different focal points of the courses they were enrolled in during that time period. In some ways, these discussions and experiences were viewed as precursors of distance learning, since the exchanges occurred via telephone and/or mail delivery points. It was observed, somewhat after the fact, that by discussing the issues utilizing the theory base from each course from which the problems / issues under consideration came, solutions to many of the problems presented in these classes were achieved.

Indeed, this professional association continued during the time that both authors served in administrative capacities as building principals, central office administrators, and finally as superintendents of school districts. By way of example of this cohort learning model, during a time when Dr. Borsa was serving as a new

principal, charged with overseeing the construction of an elementary building in a school district, he was simultaneously taking a curriculum course, which focused on dealing with the change process. The school in this example was being built as an open-spaced school and the district in question was not offering any pre-service training experiences for the principal and staff that had been selected for the school in this instructional environment / culture. Dr. Borsa has contended that as a result of their on-going professional dialogues, begun earlier, he was able to opt the new building with resulting success. The authors contend that as a result of such dialogues, that needed inservice packages were able to be created for use with the professional staff of the building in question; indeed, these inservice packages were even used later with other principals as training modules for opening new educational facilities.

Such professional networking experiences occurred between the authors throughout their professional field based careers. Indeed, it was through the opportunity to exchange ideas, strategies and discuss the application of various educationally related theories and instructional delivery programs, that many problems and issues were faced by them in various parts of the Midwest were able to be addressed. Recently, both authors left superintendencies and accepted teaching positions within departments of educational leadership at two different universities. During the Spring of 1998, it was decided to establish a distance learning seminar for graduate students in educational leadership between the two different universities via satellite technology. This decision was reached in order to provide an opportunity for graduate students enrolled in courses taught by the authors to similarly experience a cohort based learning approach to problem solving. However, it soon became apparent that course scheduling problems, to say nothing of the problems and financial factors associated with scheduling such facilities, could not be surmounted in time to implement such an instructional delivery format.

The virtual high school, Western Governors University, and the Kaplan Law School, have been paving a new way to teach and learn that just a few years ago would have been thought impossible, if not impractical. These institutions, like many others, have offered classes and degrees via the Internet. As a result of this knowledge,the authors next turned to the idea of utilizing the Internet to facilitate such a learning experience for graduate students. A literature search was carried out to determine if anyone had attempted to deliver distance learning as envisioned between two different university programs operating in different geographic regions of the country. While sixty-three (63) citations were found citing keyword descriptors of "cohort" and "instruction", no specific citations were discovered indicating programming similar to what was envisioned by the authors. Indeed, the literature did indicate that a number of universities were exploring and utilizing distance learning opportunities facilitated by satellite technology and/or the Internet. However, all found instances indicated the utilization of such technology to deliver instruction to students enrolled in classes within a given university environment, i.e., between a main campus and various alternative campus delivery points. What was beneficial via this search was the reinforcement on the construct that cohort student groupings was beneficial in regard to student learning (Davies, 1997). Indeed, it was suggested that such groupings offered a safe environment in which students could risk new behaviors, while providing positive peer pressure, reinforcement, and support necessary for successful learning (Basom, 1995; Yerkes, 1995; Davies, 1997, and Foster, 1997).

Thus, as a result of the literature search that was conducted and the problems associated with the utilization of satellite formatting for instructional delivery, the authors agreed that development of a distance learning cohort employing the Internet as the delivery focus was viable and possible. Over a five month period beginning during the Summer of 1998, exploration of technical options were explored and considered for implementation. Initially, use of a web page was considered; however,

the need to maintain a secure environment for just the cohort student group utilization, eventually ruled out a web page from consideration. Ultimately, the use of a secured listserv was found most practical for the purposes of this pilot alternative instructional delivery format. In reaching this decision point the authors had exchanged over fifty (50) e-mail messages and numerous telephone calls to workout various problems that were encountered during the development stage. Finally, a group of twenty students were subscribed to the "elrsecprincipal" majordomo listserv at the University of Southern Mississippi. These students came from the two courses being taught by the authors, i.e., "Communications and Public Relations", Dr. John Borsa, Southern Illinois University - Edwardsville and "Organization and Administration of Secondary Schools", Dr. Jack Klotz, the University of Southern Mississippi.

Instructional Outcomes

Certain outcomes for such a cohort student learning experience have been identified by the authors, these being namely that the students would:

1. Experience the opportunity to work collegually as a group, while separated by significant distance,
2. Learn to function as a single entity and as such learn to identify data necessary to address and reach a solution to the presented problem within the context of the case study format,
3. Identify with the awareness that administrative problems/issues have some degree of commonality, while separated by distance, geographic setting, and individual players,
4. Choose to begin to form a cohort network for professional career support, and finally,
5. Evolve into a community of life-long learners, committed to

supporting each other throughout both their graduate course work and future professional careers.

The Cohort Case Study Model

The case study became the method of choice for supporting the desired learning experiences for this cohort group of graduate students in educational leadership. Case study methodology has helped administrators, teachers, and members of boards of education learn proactive methods of dealing with an array of problem situations that occur daily within the confines of the educational arena. This method of learning has its roots in the Socratic method, yet, its present form began when professors attempted to bring reality into the confines of their classroom learning environments. Dewey in How We Think (1933), stated, "Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does he think,...if he cannot devise his own solution (not of course, in isolation but in correspondence with the teacher and other pupils) and find his own way out he will not learn, not even if he can recite some correct answer with one hundred percent accuracy." Decision making today in schools and school district administration has continued to become more complex. The explosion of legal, curricular, and financial implications has added to this difficult process and responsibility. The considerations encountered by the cohort in the case study approach had the potential for similarity with the real-world, yet a risk-free environment was provided by the case study design for students to learn and sharpen their knowledge and skill development, namely: decision making remained difficult, practice assisted in the process of learning, and networking and mentoring remained an important part of the learning process.

The following case study was placed on the "elrsecprincipal" (educational leadership and research secondary principal) listserv to which the identified

participating twenty graduate students from the two participating universities received the necessary background information and accompanying directions.

Pandora School District Directions and Case Study

Introduction

Welcome to all of the USM-SIU-E Class of 1998. You have consented to be part of this first ever electronic linking of two different universities, educational administration programs and students, who will be using a case study format to expand your skill levels and hopefully find a degree of commonality in the problems confronting educational leaders today. Additionally, we hope that you also will develop a stronger, possibly life-long bond or network with your fellow participants in this cohort learning experience.

Understand that your professors will have the capability of reading all communications between the cohort by calling up the listserv and requesting a copy of all communications for a determined block of time. We will do this to be able to follow your progress in this project. If you need to contact us (Dr. Borsa or Dr. Klotz), you may do so via the listserv. Remember to send everything to the listserv at: "elrsecprincipal@usm.edu". This will insure that your message will be sent to each individual on the listserv.

Directions

1. Before beginning this case study, we would like each of you to introduce yourselves to the whole group via the listserv.
2. Each member should determine the issues and potential solutions before discussions occur. These are to be written in each individual's journal.
3. Next, you are being asked to keep a journal, which you will submit to your professor at the completion of the case study. In this journal, we would like you to record your reflections on the case study, your position

in relation to items pending before the cohort, the processes you went through in your deliberations, your learnings from the experience, problems you encountered, how you (the cohort) resolved them, what you liked about this experience, how you suggest we might improve the experience in the future, and any other comments you might wish to share with us.

4. The group (cohort) should utilize brainstorming to find or identify possible solutions to problems that you encounter.

5. All major topics identified by the cohort should be defined clearly by the cohort.

6. The case mentors (professors) are responsible for keeping discussions on track. If for some reason discussion is moving in an inappropriate direction the mentors will lead the group back to the major topic.

7. When applicable, references will be provided which will expand the group's knowledge base.

8. Conclusions, decisions, implications, and recommendations must be reached and agreed upon via consensus.

9. A summary must be written and will be reviewed by the mentors for completeness.

10. An evaluation of the format and the product are to be put into each individual's journal and will be placed in the case study archives for future reference.

11. If along the way you have any questions, we ask that you send us (Dr. Borsa and Dr. Klotz) your questions via the listserv and we will answer via the same means. In an emergency, you may contact Dr. Klotz via any of the following means: Office e-mail: j.klotz@usm.edu; Office telephone: (601) 266-6062; Home e-mail: DOCKLOTZ@aol.com, and/or Home

telephone: (601) 264-3017.

Case Study

The Pandora School District

Dr. J. Borsa, Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville

Dr. Jack Klotz, The University of Southern Mississippi

The Pandora School District is located 45 miles south of a large urban/suburban complex. The district covers an area of 125 miles. Although considered rural, urban sprawl is beginning to encroach upon the district. What had been considered a farm community has, over the last five years, seen a great deal of stress from land developers. Residents of the urban/suburban complex in increasing numbers have decided that a 45 mile drive to their place of work is redeemable by the life style that the Pandora area offers.

This K-12 district currently has one high school grades 9-12 (1,200 students), a middle school grades 6-8 (750 students), and six elementary schools housing grades PreK-5, with approximately 300 students at each of these sites. It is estimated that the district will have an increase of between 5,000 and 8,000 students in the next 5 to 8 years. Two new schools are currently planned for the 1999-2000 school year. The school district placed an advertisement in various national, state, and local news services announcing these two new principal openings.

You applied for the openings. During the interview you told the committee that you completed your degree in educational administration a year ago. You have been teaching for ten years. You have wanted to be a principal because you know that you can make a difference. You explained to the committee members that you have a commitment to helping all children experience success and become life long learners. After an intense interview session with district administrators, parent, teacher, and student representatives, you have been recommended to the superintendent for an

interview as a finalist for one of these principalships.

The superintendent tells you during the interview that she needs a principal with excellent communications skills, someone who can organize, and work well with a changing community. Dr. A. Pat Ellen has been the superintendent for three years. She spent a great deal of time during your interview reviewing her goals for the district with you. It was obvious that she had a vision for the Pandora School District. You were excited about the potential that the district will be offering to those selected to become members of the administration.

You spent the morning with Dr. Ellen and after lunch she told you that she intended to recommend you to the Board of Education to take the place of a retiring principal. She explained that she had determined to recommend two other administrators for the new schools. She stated that she understood that you would not be able to leave your current teaching position until mid-June of 1999.

You submitted your letter of resignation to your current school district, effective with the conclusion of the current school year. The Board of Education of your current school district accepted your resignation and wished you well in your future professional assignment. You have already signed your new contract with the Pandora School District and will begin your first principalship on July 1, 1999. The superintendent has asked you to plan out your first year. She has stated that she would like to see your planning document by December 7, 1998.

Your task currently is to begin data gathering and planning with your cohort (as you have already noticed you have been given no information about your school).

Begin to dialogue with your cohort the questions that you will want to ask about your school and the Pandora School District.

As noted earlier, you are expected to keep an individual journal concerning your thoughts on this experience.

As you begin to develop the data necessary to begin planning and drafting your

report to the superintendent, the possibility exists that more information about the exact nature of your assignment may be provided by Superintendent Ellen.

Remember, this case study will not be completed until as a cohort all members have agreed that the assignment has been fulfilled and a draft report has been submitted to Drs. Borsa and Klotz. it is important to keep your journal entries about your thought processes. Cognitive coaching will be an important aspect of your principalship. This exercise will help you to develop the skills necessary to become a proactive administrator.

Finally, a very tight timeline has been placed on you and your cohort regrading the submission of your draft document to Dr. Ellen via Dr. Borsa and Dr. Klotz. This is not unlike the pressures that you will likely face as a school principal. Go forth now and work on the case study.

Best wishes,

Dr. John Borsa, Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville
Dr. Jack Klotz, The University of Southern Mississippi

Concluding Comments and Observations

For those readers interested in establishing a similar learning opportunity for graduate students, the authors offer the following observations, namely:

1. Determine what technology options exist between your selected participating institutions and the pro's and con's of each option related to your operational goals, courses offerings, and class schedules.
2. If you select a listserv as the vehicle of choice, explore with your organization's technology service the requirements necessary for

establishing a listserv, i.e., equipment, language for subscribing and unsubscribing individuals to a listserv, how to validate individuals membership to the listserv, how to monitor cohort correspondence, how to maintain the security of the listserv, etc.

3. If a listserv is the option selected, be sure to insure that all e-mail addresses are correctly supplied and entered onto the listserv, as any errors will prevent all individuals from receiving posted information.
4. Establish the parameters of the case study you wish to utilize and its viability to the various courses from which the cohort will be formed.
5. Finally, consider the construction of clearly stated outcome expectations and cohort participant directions for the activity.

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